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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

Working together in a cohort group and acting as a quasi-administrator has afforded me the opportunity to receive theoretical knowledge as well as on-the-job training. The cohort has also helped me as a participant develop an understanding and respect for individuals from different backgrounds and experiences. Through on-the-job training I have been able to develop and practice my own leadership style while working and learning effective strategies from my principal. The blending of these two aspects of leadership experience have contributed significantly to prepare me as a future principal. I believe the cohort, a cadre of leaders, is dedicated to becoming effective change agents. We are committed to making a difference in the schools we will someday lead.

Women rising in school leadership today is becoming more of a reality than in past years. As a woman of color I feel it is imperative that we make our voices heard as we bring to education a voice that is sensitive to and can identify with specific issues that effect the education of children of color. As I prepare to take the final steps toward certification in the educational leadership program knowing the call is great, and the role of effective leadership will be demanding. I feel confident in knowing that I have had the necessary preparation to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership

Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Carole J. Bernard

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There comes a time when a person is faced with a thought provoking question that requires a careful, thorough examination of his or her personal beliefs. As a result of completing a program of studies in Educational Leadership at the University of Northern Iowa in the spring of 2000, I find that I must examine my inner feelings and formulate my personal beliefs as to the purpose of education and its implication on students as we move into the 21st century.

During the past three years I have been exposed to various books, articles, and have attended workshops in the educational arena with an emphasis on leadership. This exposure has broadened my views and helped me formulate new perspectives about education for our ever changing society.

In addition, I have been able to discuss with teachers and administrators past practices of our educational system and how they are meeting the challenges of educating our children today. I found that many feel as I, that our system of educating today's children will require a paradigm shift. A new mindset will need to be incorporated in education so that our students are better prepared for the future.

Patton (1978) explains paradigm as a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. Paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate and reasonable. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that paradigms are basic belief systems that represent the most fundamental positions we are willing to take and which cannot be proven or disproven.

Stephen Covey (1998) in his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People defines paradigm in the more general sense and says that a paradigm is the way we see the world not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding, and interpreting. It is a theory, an explanation, or model of something else.

The term paradigm shift was introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962), in his book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. In it Kuhn shows how almost every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavor is first a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking. Thus, for education a paradigm shift, a new way of thinking should make precedent the need to rethink past practices and procedures as educators prepare students to meet future challenges.

Historically, America's public schools were first established to reflect America-- Republican, Protestant and white. During the 1840's, European immigrants began to arrive, changing the face of American society. These Irish, Jewish, Italian and Catholic immigrants did not fit the Republican, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon mold. Additionally there was another group of people occupying America at this time. They were the African Americans. Although African Americans occupied America prior to the arrival of the European immigrants, they too were not included in the education equation. They were not included until 1896 when the Plessy v Ferguson Doctrine was passed establishing separate but equal schooling for them.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the most noted desegregation case making schools integrated was passed by the U.S. Supreme Court. This court decision marked the beginning of a movement that fundamentally changed the demographics of the

classroom and focused on achieving greater equality in public schools. The year 2004 will mark the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board*. Will American public schools continue a trend of becoming more segregated and less than equal than in 1954?"

In addition to the changing American populace, economics and demographic shifts were taking place. Americans became a society of industrialists and factory workers. Small towns became cities. While these changes in American society were taking place education was not changing to reflect that of a new and changing society. Industrialization had given energy to the hopes and dreams of Americans and formed the basis for the belief in a predictable future. Schools were seen as the means for maintaining basic values, nation building, and preparation for a predictable future.

The 1980's have been noted as one of the longest sustained education reform periods in U. S. history. At this time much attention began to focus on education in America. This was due in part to our children being compared with children in other industrialized nations. Reform issues continue to address the commitment to maintaining the industrial past. The conflict is with those who realize that the world's most urgent problems can no longer be resolved within the framework of the industrial order. True reform refers to changes in the formal structure of schooling in terms of organization, timetables, and roles. Many reform efforts are innovative, but there is little that can be said for there providing long term, large-scale success. A multitude of efforts at the national and state level are in progress to set high standards for student learning. School reform will need engaged teachers, parental and community support to improve learning for all students.

In 1983, the National Commission on Educational Excellence, issued a widely publicized report entitled, *A Nation at Risk* attesting to the decline of American schooling. Educational systems were under attack in large urban areas for their failure to provide a quality education for all of its students. These urban centers were faced with large minority populations and students from poor, economic backgrounds. While equity and excellence hold all students accountable for reaching high performance standards, the specifics about equity have not been clear. Children who are educationally and socially disadvantaged do not have, realistically speaking, a chance to meet high standards unless certain conditions exist that provide an equal basis for **all** students.

Kozol (1991) gives a bleak portrait in his book, Savage Inequalities of some urban schools attended by many poor and minority students. His findings offer clear evidence that high standards will be an unreachable goal for **all** students unless we pay attention to how we prepare students with different needs to meet the same learning goals.

Education of the past functioned under the philosophical perspective of integral liberalism. It is the perspective that most of us were educated in. Schools served as academic institutions where the central goal was to teach students to read, write, and compute.

Today societal values have changed the concept of the absolute value of freedom, and equality are being challenged. Education in our schools today continues to serve as not only an academic oasis, but additionally, as a social and or welfare institution offering services anywhere from after school programs to providing medical assistance to families.



Societies are judged by their ability to nurture their young and prepare them to provide for themselves and the next generation. The Nigerian proverb, "It takes a whole village to educate a child, " implies that everyone has a role to play in preparing a child to take his place in society. Our nation's schools will be more effective when our society can come together and embrace the concept that education is everybody's business.

American education is complex in nature says Karl E. Wieck (1974) professor of psychology and organizational behavior at Cornell University. Furthermore, he explains that political interactions exist between various levels of government. These interactions control education for our children in a system that is "loosely coupled." Each unit of the system is independent. It is time for society to realize that the only way schools will continue to survive is to become a learning organization where everyone has a role to play in improving schools. Schools will not succeed in isolation. Education for the children in the 21st century should be viewed more and more as a cooperative effort. Empowering teachers, students, and parents will prove to be a useful tool. Input in decision making will foster ownership and increase the chances of implementing new ideas for learning. Institutions, leaders, parents and teachers must work together to create a climate for children that is focused on educating students for success. They must not only think about the next ten years, but see what is down the road for the next twenty to twenty five years. For example the impact of computers, the Internet, and on-line technology is changing the school's curriculum and how students learn. There is widespread concern about student violence in the schools which has fostered a need for safety plans to be in place.

Parental involvement is one key component in educating students for success. Parents are a child's first teacher and play a major role in nurturing, and in the educational development of the child. Bushweller (1996), *Take My Children Pleeze*, explains that parents need to be committed to taking responsibility for rearing their children and become active participants in their child's education.

### Personal Beliefs

In the book, Leading With Soul, Bolman and Deal (1995) state: "When you don't know what you believe in, you don't know who you are. You don't know why you're here. You can't see where you are going" (p.51).

The heart of my beliefs is central to children with a commitment to see that all children in school are being well served. My reflections as to the purpose of education articulate who I am, why I am an educator, my personal and professional goals and, the role I feel government, administrators, teachers, parents, and students play in education.

Historian W.E.B. DuBois indicated in The Souls of Black Folks, (1903) that education should produce children who are literate and well informed, take responsibility for decision-making in their lives, and work to make a positive difference in the future of humankind. Although these words still hold true for education today I believe the goal of education is more demanding today than ever before. In addition to what DuBois believed about education Schlechty (1991) indicates schools are expected to develop aptitudes, as opposed to simply identify them. Schools should encourage students to be creative thinkers and problem solvers and be producers of knowledge as well as receivers of it.

Education must train children to be responsible citizens, adapt to change, instill moral value, ensure cultural diversity, and prepare students to compete in the emerging information based-global economy, contribute to productive work, and give service to others. Education today should provide students with opportunities for participation in the mainstream of society through the development of necessary skills that are purposeful, by making a connection between education and the real world. Students must understand why education makes a difference in our society. Programs and course offerings should reflect the skills required to meet the needs of our changing society. One of the seven habits of highly effective people identified by Covey (1989) is to begin with the end in mind. If the development of a successful graduate is the end we want then the purpose of education must be redefined. Our greatest asset as a society is its public schools and those educators who make them. They are our best hope to create a better future for the next generation to come. Today's education will require educators to instruct with hands, head, and heart to ensure that they can best meet the needs of the diverse group of children in our schools.

We need education in the **hands** to work in a new kind of job environment, we need education of the **head** to help think through complex problems of today's world, and we need education of the **heart** to work together with one another. (Leon Sullivan, p.1991)

Research has demonstrated that the early years of a child's education is crucial to his or her long-term success and the teacher is the key figure in determining the effectiveness of those years. The teacher is the decisive element in the classroom.

Because of a teacher, we are all where we are today. Someone inspired us, encouraged us, made us feel good about who we are, and helped us to develop character.

Hunter (1983) has done extensive work to show that effective teaching can improve achievement among students regardless of their IQ or socio-economic origin. It is the personal approach of the teacher that creates the climate or tone of the learning environment. As I reflect back to my own educational experience as a student in the classroom, I find that I best remember teachers, rather than courses. I remember their manner, their methods, their enthusiasm and their intellectual excitement. I was motivated and inspired by their behavior.

Research done by Good and Brophy (1970) found that students' behavior, effort, and achievement levels will conform more and more closely to the teacher expectations. Therefore, it can not be emphasized enough that schools be equipped with effective teachers. Effective teachers are those who have high expectations for their students, who interact with their students, give feedback, actively instruct and supervise students, have classroom management techniques in place, create opportunities for diverse learning experiences, and accept responsibility for student outcomes.

I believe it was the care and concern shown me as an individual, by the "good" teachers that I still remember to this day. They created a warm, social-emotional "in class" relationship that enhanced my self-esteem, gave support, and motivated me to learn. They developed the ethic of care that enabled them to nurture their students. These teachers though they were few in number went the extra mile to "unbank the fire" (a term used in the south which means to remove the ashes from a fire that is not completely out).

Noddings (1992) contends that individuals guided by an ethic of care emphasize living together, on creating, on maintaining and enhancing positive relations.

In addition to the teachers, I had role models and mentors who stirred gifts within me believing in me, pushing me, encouraging me, and supporting me as I grew. I was blessed to have as my first role model and mentor, my mother (now deceased). She struggled to raise five children alone. Well, not totally alone. She needed and received help in raising me (the oldest), my three sisters and one brother from extended family members, the church, and others in our community. My mother emphasized the importance of getting an education, being self sufficient, and helping others.

Edelman (1999) in her book, Lanterns A Memoir of Mentors pays tribute to the mentors who helped illuminate her way throughout her life.

O God, I thank You for the lanterns in my life who illumined dark and uncertain paths calmed and stilled debilitating doubts and fears with encouraging words, wise lessons, gentle touches, firm nudges, and faithful actions along my journey of life and back to You. (p xiii)

In the tradition of who I am having grown up female, and of African American decent, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and remember those who have helped me along the way. I stand on the strong and mighty shoulders of African American women who in the field of education have made a way for educators like myself to be a part of such an influential position and for this I am thankful. It is with pride that I applaud and acknowledge **their** efforts and accomplishments. The following female African American educators have worked or continue to work to make a difference in the lives of children.

### Sheroes Role Models

Septima Clark (1898-1987) born in Charleston, South Carolina believed literacy was the key to empowerment. After teaching several years in South Carolina public schools she was fired for becoming a member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Additionally she was denied 30 years worth of retirement pay. This did not deter her from her calling. She recruited hundreds of teachers to teach thousands of others to read. She was accredited with developing citizenship schools throughout the south (Lanker, 1989).

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) born in Maysville, South Carolina. Bethune with only \$1.50 had a vision of establishing a school for young African American women. With much determination she baked and sold sweet potato pies to raise money to help make education available to thousands of African Americans. In 1923 she established Bethune Cookman College in Daytona, Florida (Lanker, 1989).

Marva Collins born in 1936 in Monroeville, Alabama. Marva had a vision of educating children who were labeled "learning disabled," unteachable or retarded by the Chicago Public School system. In 1975 she founded Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. The school's motto is "Enter to learn exit to serve" (Collins, 1990).

Mary Hatwood Futrell born in 1940 in Alta Vista, Virginia. She grew poor in a single parent home, but education was a priority in the home and community. In 1983 Futrell became president of the NEA (National Education Association). Her philosophy was to never allow circumstances to hold you back and find yourself through education (Lanker, 1989).

Dr. Lorraine Monroe was born in New York City, New York. She has spent over thirty years as a teacher, principal, and education consultant. Dr. Monroe takes her readers on a journey that outlines the essence of what she has learned as an educator in her book, Nothing's Impossible Leadership Lessons from Inside and Outside the Classroom (the Monroe Doctrine as she calls it) (Monroe, 1997). One of her chief points is that when life throws obstacles your way, you go around them, rather than use hardships as an excuse for your shortcomings. Because of these women I celebrate the privilege of being an educator. I do not take the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children lightly. I realize and accept the calling that I am a major force in molding and shaping children in my roles as teacher and principal.

### Effective Leadership

Just as the teacher is the decisive element in the classroom, the principal is the decisive element for the entire school. The principal's leadership role in shaping, teaching, and learning has been singled out as the most important factor in schools that work. Because the responsibilities of a principal have become increasingly complex, principals like teachers will need new paradigms, a new mindset, and new guidelines for implementing change that will make a difference in the schools they lead. The characteristics of effective leadership of a principal include; a positive attitude, is a visionary, demands high quality teaching, recruits and hires good teachers, seeks extra resources to meet student goals, monitors student progress, shares power through decision making and reduces the risk environment where students learn and staff teach.

The way in which these characteristics are carried out denotes the style of ones leadership. The leadership style of the principal is determined by deep-seated values, beliefs and moral character. These values and beliefs are mirrored throughout the school.

The work of Sergiovanni (1992) and Barth (1992) explain the moral dimensions of leadership and how moral leadership can serve to bring about change. The book, Lincoln on Leadership by Phillips (1992) best illustrates the ideals of moral, ethical leadership and provides its readers with valuable principles and gives tangible examples of Lincoln's management and leadership style. The application of Lincoln's principles are universal and are applicable to anyone in a leadership role today. The book addresses these principles in four major areas; people, character traits, leading, and communication. There are four principles that I feel are most applicable to me and my leadership style.

#### Get Out Among The People--Circulate

The key to practicing personal leadership is knowing how to motivate people and how to demonstrate interpersonal skills. While serving in office, Lincoln maintained an open door policy which allowed anyone that wished to talk to him the freedom to do so. He made it a point to go out and interact with people. He spent time among the troops. He personalized his contact with his subordinates and often met with his generals and cabinet members in their homes. To show care and concern he visited the sick and wounded in the hospitals. His personal attention to others made them feel valued.



I agree with Lincoln's principle, **"Get out of the office-circulate."** I believe the principalship is a people-oriented position that requires good interpersonal skills, therefore, the school principal should not isolate him/herself from the faculty, but should foster collegiality and collaboration by; being highly visible, interact with staff on a daily basis, dialog and discuss concerns, share and visit classrooms to see learning take place. Being visible and deploying oneself helps create a community within the school. The principal must be a "people person," that is, like Lincoln one must acquire good interpersonal skills and get out of the office, circulate, interact with people.

A principal should be willing to show care and concern for others. Individuals who feel supported and cared for will work better to fulfill their sense of commitment and purpose for working in the school.

#### Preach A Vision and Continually Reaffirm It

A definition of vision offered by Sergiovanni (1995), explains that vision is the capacity to create and communicate a view of the desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization. Numerous studies show that effective leaders must have a vision. The purpose of vision is to then create an "ideal." One's passion for this ideal will act as a magnet attracting people who have the same vision and will commit to working toward its reality.

Blanchard and Bowles (1998) use an illustration of "The Spirit of the Squirrel." in their book Gung Ho to illustrate how to get people in any organization motivated. To do this they say the workers must feel that their work is meaningful and understood as important, and that it leads to shared goals, values, decisions and actions.

Lincoln preached his vision. It was simple and clear. He expressed a belief that equity and freedom were the birthright of all men and it should be protected and preserved for future generations. He was passionate about his belief and conveyed this throughout the four years in his administration. He made his vision a personal mission and conveyed his message at every given opportunity. He repeated and reaffirmed his vision so that it would not diminish in meaning. An example of his concepts of mixing vision and reaffirmation is illustrated in his Gettysburg Address where the concepts and phrases used were part of his vision for the nation for years. Through his vision he was able to influence his followers to realize that his vision was important and that its reality would make the world a better place.

There is a proverb in the Bible that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18) This proverb emphasizes the need to have a focus. A school that lacks vision does not have a clear focus for learning. The principal as educator plays a big role in the overall vision for the school. The principal must not only have a vision, but must express the vision daily in words and actions, facilitate, translate, and build it into a school's learning community. Building a vision requires that the principal have a real passion for what he or she envisions for the school.

Greenfield (1985) notes that research done in regard to vision concluded from extensive studies of the principalship and school leadership that principals need to be passionate about their work, clear about what they seek to accomplish, and aggressive in searching for understanding that leads to improved schooling.

An example of a passionate belief is illustrated in the book of Moses. Like Lincoln, Moses believed that freedom was the birthright of all men. The story illustrates the idea that one's passion about a vision will be like "the burning bush" that never consumes itself. Moses was transformed on top of the mountain. When he came down, he was passionate about his vision to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He went forth from that day and never missed an opportunity to preach and reaffirm his vision. (Exodus 3:2)

The principal as leader must reaffirm the school's vision by recognizing, celebrating and rewarding individual teachers and groups who are working hard to reach goals. Recognition sends a message to everyone as to what is considered important for the school's success.

### Honesty and Integrity Are The Best Policies

Research done by Peters (1985) found that successful organizations were the ones that stressed integrity and trust. Integrity is closely tied to the values exhibited by an effective leader.

Honesty is one of the major qualities that made Lincoln a great leader. He practiced what he preached. Integrity was evident in his words and actions. He believed that a person should always do the right thing. He was an effective leader because he lived this principle. He believed that all men were created equal in the eyes of God. This was the premise of our founding fathers and rooted in the Declaration of Independence. It is what our country believed in.

Everyone watches the principal, what he or she says, does, or attends to is constantly watched by students, teachers, parents, and the community.

The inner person is revealed by ones thoughts, actions, ethical and moral values. The stakeholders; students, teachers, parents and the community must perceive the principal as having integrity and being of good character, trustworthy, honest and fair. Honesty and ethical behaviors guide the principal's actions and demonstrate to the learning community the true character of the principal. The principal's values or lack of strongly effects his or her followers.

### Encourage Innovation

Lincoln effected change by being decisive. He created a climate that was nonthreatening. Risk taking was encouraged and subordinates were encouraged to be innovative. Lincoln realized that by allowing others to feel free to try new ideas, he himself, learned something in the process. This is one aspect of leadership that is often overlooked, encouraging others to try new things. Through his principle of encouraging innovative ideas Lincoln showed that everyone can contribute to the nation's success. Every school should continually look for ways to improve so that success is achieved by all students.

The principal must foster a culture within the school that shares power and input in making decisions for change. The principal should promote an atmosphere that allows teachers to work collaboratively in decision making. There should be new mindsets, new outlooks, and new identities when talking about change.

The art of leading others is difficult to master. There are no definite rules for leaders to follow, but Lincoln does offer some musts for effective leadership. I embrace his ideals, precepts, and the character by which Lincoln employed in his leadership style.

Lincoln can be looked at as a role model for effective leadership. What he stood for was so positive that the man and his principles have made a lasting impression as one of this nation's greatest leaders. He transformed his subordinates by leading with moral authority. As a man he lived his passion and walked his talk. Lincoln through his passion was able to persuade a nation to collectively embrace his vision, that all men were created equal. After all it was established by the founding fathers of this nation and it is still embraced by our nation today.

The perspective of leadership has changed today from school administrators who were once thought of as managers to now having administrators being able to possess the capacity to access information and use it to produce new knowledge. Schools need to become learning organizations in which everyone is a learner.

In The Fifth Discipline Senge (1990) speaks of future administrators as having what he calls "personal mastery" a clear personal vision for themselves and being clear in their own mind about the beliefs that drive the vision. Leadership for Senge is not based on ones position within an organization, but personal mastery should be a goal of everyone regardless of their position.

### Summary

My personal vision provides a framework within which I make use of all that I have read, heard, and done during my course of studies at the University of Northern Iowa. The experiences that I have had over these past three years have served as a road map that I believe will increase the probability of success for me in school administration.

Working together in a cohort group and acting as a quasi-administrator has afforded me the opportunity to receive theoretical knowledge as well as on-the-job training. The cohort has also helped me as a participant develop an understanding and respect for individuals from different backgrounds and experiences. Through on-the-job training I have been able to develop and practice my own leadership style while working and learning effective strategies from my principal. The blending of these two aspects of leadership experience have contributed significantly to prepare me as a future principal. I believe the cohort, a cadre of leaders, is dedicated to becoming effective change agents. We are committed to making a difference in the schools we will someday lead.

Women rising in school leadership today is becoming more of a reality than in past years. As a woman of color I feel it is imperative that we make our voices heard as we bring to education a voice that is sensitive to and can identify with specific issues that effect the education of children of color.

As I prepare to take the final steps toward certification in the educational leadership program knowing the call is great, and the role of effective leadership will be demanding. I feel confident in knowing that I have had the necessary preparation to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

I believe that we have all been placed here on earth for a purpose. I believe what God has planned for us far exceeds anything we could ever imagine. I believe that I am what inspirational writer Mandino ( 1975) refers to in his book The Greatest Miracle in the World, the greatest miracle in the world.

Mandino explains that God has sent, to every generation, special people, talented people, brilliant people capable of performing the greatest miracle in the world. When I think of all the possibilities of leadership and the fear of not being adequate as a leader permeates my thought, I am reminded of a quote by Nelson Mandella that says:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our light that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.  
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so  
that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to manifest the glory of God that is  
within us. It's in everyone, and, as we let our light shine  
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence  
automatically liberates others. (1994 Inaugural Speech)

With this in mind, I feel I have unlimited potential for success. Assuming the courage to lead lies in my desire to make this world a better place. Education is the key. As I look to the future of education, it is my hope that in my efforts to help improve schools I, like Septima Clark, Mary McLeod Bethune, Marva Collins, Mary Futrell, Dr. Monroe and Abraham Lincoln leave a legacy as being a role model for effective change and that I was instrumental in leading a school where everyone was a learner. I would like others to remember me as one who cared enough to make a difference.

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